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SUBJECT: ROMA VOTE BUYING: MONEY FOR NOTHING

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1. (SBU) Poloff spent June 17 - election day - in the eastern Spis region with Roma politician and activist Peter Pollak, who - juggling three phones, several phone directories, and a bottle of water - was canvassing Roma settlements investigating allegations of vote buying. Both Pollak and National Democratic Institute (NDI) Director Zuzana Dzurikova (who was observing settlements in western Slovakia) reported that the problem of vote buying was much more widespread than in previous years, when "only one party" (usually HZDS) would come to villages and offer Roma goulash, wine, a small amount of money, and a ride to polling places to vote for "their choice" of candidates. Nevertheless, the Roma themselves were reluctant to speak to reporters about vote buying. Shedding light on the practice, they noted, would mean the money would no longer come. While they may or may not vote for the people the bribes intend, they will not say "no" to free money.

WHY PARTIES SHOULDN'T TRY IT...

2. (SBU) A sociology professor in eastern Slovakia's Presov University told us that he expected vote buying to be more widespread during local elections, when rather large percentages of the vote can be bought for a relatively small amount of money. He said there were several disincentives to major parties buying Roma votes in parliamentary elections, primarily the cost/benefit analysis: the Roma represent a small statistical voting block, while the risk of scandal would be "too great" for the parties. In addition, the distribution of regular government social benefit payments on June 15 - two days before the June 17 elections - may have made some Roma less likely to take the money.

...AND HOW THEY TRIED, AND FAILED

3. (SBU) Despite this logic, vote buying was "at its worst" on election day. While touring with Pollak, Poloff personally observed vote buying in the town of Letanovce, where a Rom from a neighboring town had set up shop outside of the village's polling place to offer SKK 50 (around USD 1.65) to Roma villagers in exchange for votes for candidates on the party list for Nadej ("Hope"). Other vote peddlers traveled to the Roma settlement outside the town, where they handed out wine and cigarettes and increased the price to SKK 100 (around USD 3.20) to compensate for the long walk. When the vote buyers saw Poloff and Pollak talking to local Roma activists about their activities, they promptly departed.

¶4. (SBU) Similar situations were observed in the towns of Markusovce, Spisska Nova Ves, and Krumpach. Region-wide, the "price" of a Roma vote seemed to average SKK 150 (around USD 5.00), though in Krumpach, the local candidate on the SDKU party list was distributing groceries instead of cash. In Spisska Nova Ves, a microbus was seen transporting Roma citizens to vote; none of the village's inhabitants knew which party was sponsoring the transportation, however, and the President of the polling place for the area told us that she had seen nothing suspicious and reported no incidents of fraud.

¶5. (SBU) It is important to note that the vote buying seemed to be organized at the local level by local candidates seeking "preferential votes" which would guarantee them a place in parliament - if their party gets in. Only one party exhibited a trend consistent with broader organization: Nadej. Despite only receiving a fraction of a percent of nation-wide votes, the party did "surprisingly" well in the Spis region, where it took as much as 40 percent of the vote in some localities; however, it received a mere 0.63 percent nationwide and did not make it into Parliament.

MONEY FOR NOTHING

¶6. (SBU) In the final tally, four of the five parties observed buying votes in the east - Nadej, Slobodne Forum (SF), Movement for Democracy (HZD), and the Communist party (KSS) - were nowhere near the five percent threshold required to enter parliament. NDI is attempting to put the word out that the practice doesn't pay, and that parties hoping to get the Roma vote should do so by focusing on Roma issues. NDI is particularly concerned that widespread vote buying during national elections is a harbinger of worse

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things to come in December's local elections, during which it fears politicians will participate in broader vote buying schemes. NDI is planning to mobilize election monitors that day, and also is planning to publish a "list of shame" on the internet of people known to have participated in vote buying in previous election cycles.

COMMENT: DID IT HAVE A LARGER IMPACT?

¶7. (SBU) Our MPP goal of integrating Roma into Slovak society includes encouraging responsible political involvement by both majority and minority politicians and voters. Vote-buying undermines this, and the Ambassador and other officers will continue to speak out against the practice and to support NDI's efforts. In addition to marginalizing and patronizing the Roma community, the practice of buying Roma votes may have an effect on the electorate at large. One man in eastern Slovakia told Emboffs in advance of the elections that he was not planning on going to the polls, because his vote would be negated by "the bought votes of several Roma." Articles about the practice appeared immediately after the elections in Slovakia's English-language press. NDI and activists like Peter Pollak will attempt to focus more media attention on the issue, although many of the Roma who told us about the problem also expressed their disinterest in talking to reporters.

VALLEE